

## LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, PERFORMANCE

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Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. [Judges 12: 6]

The identity test imposed by the Gileadites on the Ephraimite fugitives at the passages of Jordan suggests that the recognition of ways and means of speaking as indices of social categories has a venerable history. After the passage of several millenia, much the same associational understanding of the relationship between language and identity employed to such violent ends by the Gileadites guides the contemporary - and one would hope more benign - line of sociolinguistic inquiry that centers on the investigation of ethnicity or region or gender or age or occupation as “sociolinguistic variables” (see, e.g., Coulmas 1997).

The addition of a third term, performance, to the nexus of language and identity, however, occasions a reorientation of analytical perspective. If we take performance in the sense of linguistic practice - situated, interactional, communicatively motivated - our investigative focus shifts from correlational sociolinguistics to the pragmatically oriented exploration of “when and how identities are interactively invoked by sociocultural actors” through the discursive deployment of linguistic resources (Kroskrity 1993: 222). In this perspective, identity is an emergent construction, the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others. This is clearly a productive line of inquiry, and one to which all of the contributors to this issue would subscribe.

While acknowledging and exploiting the analytical power of this practice-centered perspective, however, the authors of the papers collected here have taken an additional step into less well charted investigative territory, guided by a more marked conception of verbal performance. Here, performance is understood as a special mode of situated communicative practice, resting on the assumption of accountability to an audience for a display of communicative skill and efficacy. In this sense of performance, the act of expression is put on display, objectified, marked out to a degree from its discursive surroundings and opened up to interpretive scrutiny and evaluation by an audience. Performance foregrounds form-function-meaning interrelationships through verbal display (Bauman 1977; Hymes 1975). The six case-studies that follow suggest some of the ways that an orientation to this mode of performance

may illuminate the relationship between language and identity.

The case described by Lida Dutkova in “Texas Czech Folk Music and Ethnic Identity” is suffused with the ideological legacy of Herder, who has persuaded much of the modern world that language is the essence of a people’s national (or ethnic) identity and that the best and highest use of language in the expression of an authentic national culture lies in the verbal art of folksong and poetry, existing now only as a distressed remnant of a vanishing past that must be recuperated if the nation is to preserve itself (Bauman and Briggs 1999). In the central Texas communities of Dutkova’s investigation, the Czech language has become fully folklorized. If language is the preeminent sign of ethnic identity, then the remnants of Czech, packaged in song, become signs of a sign, the performative display of which indexes the language-identity nexus at one further remove. Song lyrics in Czech - with music, costume, dance steps, and cuisine - serve as touchstones of more complex, but now attenuated, cultural wholes. These emblems of ethnic identity are managed and mobilized by cultural specialists in special performance events - principally dances and folklife festivals - in which Czech culture is enacted, embodied, and placed on display. The Czech language, in this context, becomes increasingly indexical, less symbolic (in the Peircian sense); as the number of speakers declines over successive generations, the language becomes referentially more opaque. In these communities, Czech has become a ritual language, analogous to the Latin of the traditional Catholic liturgy. It resides essentially in the hands - or, rather, the minds and mouths - of cultural specialists, and for the rest of the people, especially the youth, it suffices to take part in the cultural performance as communicants in order to reaffirm one’s ethnic identity.

If Dutkova’s study demonstrates the persistent strength of the Herderian ideology, the Corsican case presented by Alexandra Jaffe in “Comic Performance and the Articulation of Hybrid Identity” suggests how it may be problematized and challenged. In the bilingual comic performances that are the focus of Jaffe’s analysis, Corsican and French elements are blended together so fluently and cohesively as to render ambiguous just what language it is that we are hearing. An especially striking feature of these performances is the intensification of the linguistic ambiguities through the proliferation of additional domains of ambiguity within the performance: We have a man in the persona of a woman, an individual person representing himself as his own cloned double, a monologue enacting a dialogue, a word in the paronomastic shadow of another word, a language that may be one language or two languages or less than a language, and so on. This piling on of ambiguities requires complex interpretive effort, and Jaffe’s ethnographic investigations - not to mention her own interpretive travails, nicely factored into the analysis - reveal that this interpretive work yields multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. Everything - especially, in Jaffe’s analysis, language - is up for grabs. These comic performances problematize the relationship of language to nationality, gender, class, region, age, and more. Identity emerges from these performances as shifting, labile, ambiguous, and interpretively open.

In Marcia Farr’s analysis of Mexican *ranchero* speech, it is not language per se (as linguistic code) that serves as an identificational resource, but a speech style, a way of speaking that is understood and employed as a means of enacting identification with a group and differentiation from others. *Franqueza* - frank, direct, to the point, self-assertive speech,

markedly unencumbered by the mitigating devices of politeness - represents for *ranchero* people an enactment of the qualities they most value about themselves and want others to perceive: Self-reliance, confidence, personal autonomy, the readiness to look everyone straight in the eye. As a way of speaking, this speech style involves a significant measure of performance insofar as speaking with *franqueza* is a mode of verbal - as well as ideological and identificational - display, reflexively on view and subject to evaluation for how well it is carried off. But the performance does not stop here, as Farr's analysis reveals. Virtuoso displays of *franqueza* are notably reportable, the stuff of stories that afford an additionally reflexive opportunity for narrative performance, highlighting the salient features of the speech style, placing them representationally on display as reported speech, contrasting them dramatically with other ways of speaking, and demonstrating the positive effects of their use.

The presentational style summed up by the notion of *fare bella figura* (to make a beautiful figure) in the Chicago Italian community of which Gloria Nardini writes, has affinities with the *ranchero* ideal of *franqueza*, insofar as it represents a code for the performative display of morally and aesthetically valorized comportment, a standard for the public projection of oneself as a person of propriety and social worth. Again, as with *franqueza*, *fare bella figura* incorporates a way of speaking among other systems of signification. What Nardini offers us, however, is a glimpse backstage, in which the decorous public projection of *bella figura* can be relaxed in an inversive and playful performance of indecorous joking, a licensed offstage breakthrough into what would otherwise be condemned as *fare brutta figura* (to make an ugly figure). Her essay reminds us that there is a poetics of the bad and the ugly as well as the good and the beautiful, that "talking bad," properly situated, is not incompatible with the publicly valorized verbal projection of moral identity.

In Peter Haney's study, the transgressive performance is decidedly frontstage, in full public view, bound up in the manipulation of another order of speech style, namely, genre. A basic frame of reference for Haney's analysis is provided by the sociocultural resonances of the song genre, *tango*, among mid-century Mexican-Americans in South Texas: Cosmopolitan, glamorous, somewhat exotic, and middle class in appeal. But the true focus of Haney's essay is the burlesque recontextualization of tango as parody, in the *carpa*, or tent show, performance, a primarily working-class form of popular entertainment. Here the double-voiced inflection of the parody offers a complex metacommentary on the sociology of taste in the Texas-Mexican community. Like the comic performances analyzed by Jaffe, the parodic performance of Sr. García opens an ambiguous discursive and interpretive space, here, though, through inversive calibration of the gap between the conventional tango and its parodic double (Briggs and Bauman 1992). And it is precisely in this space, Haney suggests, that the emergent identity of working-class Mexican-American men was symbolically constructed and laid open to contemplation. The tango genre and its parodic transformation in performance jointly define a field of discourse within which the identity features of class, gender, ethnicity, and morality are brought into poetic relief and interpretively co-constructed by the performer and his audience.

Valentina Pagliai's essay, like Peter Haney's, centers on a song genre, the Tuscan *contrasto*, improvised in alternating turns in an agonistic face-off between two competing poets. A favored subject matter of these song duels is the identity that accrues from place; each

poet in turn claims and celebrates the place from which he draws his own identity - town, district, region - and denigrates the place claimed by his opponent. The *contrasto*, then, itself contrasts with the identificational resources treated in the contributions we have considered thus far. In this poetic form, the expression and negotiation of identity is referentially explicit rather than indexical, and the oppositional contrasts are more overtly manifest in the dyadic give-and-take and intertextual alternation of the song duel than they are in the dialogic resonances of unitary utterances. In the emergent unfolding of the performance, however, as Pagliai points out, the identificational fields constructed by the poets shift constantly, as images of place and people are constantly realigned in physical space and recalibrated in value space, intensified by the formal complexity and poetic virtuosity of the poets' verbal display.

Within the limited compass of a brief introduction such as this, one cannot do full justice to the descriptive and analytical richness of the papers that follow. Rather, drawing on the authors' own insights, I have attempted to suggest at least some of the insights to be gained by using performance as a point of entry into the investigation of the relationship between language and identity. In general compass, however, I would argue - as do the authors of these essays - that it is the multiply reflexive nature of performance that renders it an especially privileged site for the investigation of the communicative constitution of social life, including the construction and negotiation of identity. Performance calls forth special attention on the part of performer and audience alike to the intrinsic qualities of the communicative act, to form, and this formal reflexivity in turn highlights the salience and cultural resonance of the meanings and values to which the performer gives voice. Verbal performances, then, turn out to be reflexive in several dimensions; not only are they linguistic forms about language, but also cultural forms about culture, social forms about society. Such performances, then, represent for participants an arena for the display, contemplation, and manipulation of salient elements, practices, and relationships that allow language to serve as a resource for the expression of identity. For the investigator, they afford an illuminating vantage point on the form-function-meaning interrelationships that must be at the center of a socially constituted linguistics (Hymes 1974: 195-209). The orientation to performance that shapes the ethnographic and linguistic analysis reported in the papers that follow has in every case revealed complex and deeply meaningful aspects of the relationship between language and social identity, rooted in time and place, that could not have been discovered by other means. Performance matters - it cannot be dismissed as mere aesthetic embellishment layered upon some independently constituted social reality. As the authors have amply demonstrated, performance is a consequential, efficacious mode of linguistic practice, a potent means of creating, negotiating, and displaying social meaning and value in the communicative accomplishment of social life.

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